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LEE BEFORE THE WAR

The Lees of Virginia are descended from Richard Lee, who came to this country in the early part of the seventeenth century. Richard's English affiliations have been the subject of much dispute. Early Virginia genealogists derived him from the ancient and honorable family of Shropshire Lees and thought they had identified him exactly. Grave difficulties were discovered in this connection and at one time the emigrant seemed likely to be transferred to the delightful kinship of Sir Harry Lee of Ditchley and Woodstock. But the authorities were still dissatisfied and have now apparently returned to the Shropshire origin, though Richard's precise position in that family is not easily determined.

On his mother's side Robert Lee, doubtless like some hundreds of thousands of others, is said to trace descent from King Robert Bruce.

Like many people who have ancestors, Lee displayed a considerable indifference to them. "General Lee had never the time or inclination to study genealogy, and always said he knew nothing beyond his first ancestor, Colonel Richard Lee, who migrated to America in the reign of Charles I." In having a seal cut he does indeed, with apology, show some interest about the arms, "which I have thought, perhaps foolishly enough, might as well be right as wrong." But when an enterprising genealogist undertakes a Lee book, the general's comment is: "I am very much obliged to Mr.—— for the trouble he has taken in relation to the Lee genealogy. I have no desire to have it published, and do not think it would afford sufficient interest beyond the immediate family to pay for the expense. I think the money had better be appropriated to relieve the poor."

Which does not mean that he was not daily and hourly conscious with pride that he belonged to the Virginia Lees, a name writ as large as any in the history of the country and transmitted to him with an honor which it was his constant care never to tarnish. From the first Richard down, the Lees had always been doing something useful and often something great, and they

were distinguished by the friendship as well as the admiration of Washington.

Robert Lee's father, Light Horse Harry, fought the revolutionary battles beside Washington and Greene. He was a fiery soldier and a more impetuous spirit than his son. He took a hot and eager part in politics and had warm friends and bitter enemies. In his last, lingering illness his colored nurse did something he did not like. He flung his boot at her. She flung it back and won his heart. It is a trivial incident but it is worth a chapter in differentiating the father from the son, who flung no boots and had none flung at him.

Harry Lee was a scholar and loved literature. He read Sophocles and Racine and the Greek philosophers and commented on them in letters far more spirited and delightful than any of Robert's. The father also wrote memoirs which the son edited. Partial admirers rate them with Cæsar's. Jefferson, who hated Lee politically, says of them: "I am glad to see the romance of Lee removed from the shelf of history to that of fable. Some small portions of the transactions he relates were within my own knowledge; and of these I can say he has given more falsehood than fact."

Harry Lee was forty-nine years old in 1807 when Robert was born. The son was only eleven when his father died and during much of that time they had not been together. Therefore the paternal influence is not likely to have been very great. Nevertheless, Lee cherished his father's memory with deep reverence. When he was in South Carolina in 1861 he writes, "I had the gratification at length of visiting my father's grave." And Colonel Long describes the incident simply but impressively: "He went alone to the tomb, and after a few moments of silence, plucked a flower and slowly retraced his steps."

Lee's relations with his mother were much more intimate and prolonged. She appears to have been a woman of high character and to have taught her son practical as well as moral excellences. She was for many years an invalid and Robert took much of the care both of her and of the household, which may have been useful training in self-sacrifice, but must have cut him off somewhat from the natural outflow, the fresh, spontane-

ousness of boyish spirits. I think he showed the effect of this all his life.

Of his childish years we know little. He came so late to greatness that the usual crop of reminiscences does not seem to have been gathered. Perhaps he did not furnish good material for reminiscences. Who were his companions? Did he love them and they him? What were his hopes and ambitions? Was it to be said of him as was said of his father that "he seems to have come out of his mother's womb a soldier"? We get a rare glimpse of love for sports: "In later days General Lee has been heard to relate with enthusiasm how as a boy he had followed the hunt (not infrequently on foot) for hours over hill and valley without fatigue." Horses all his life were a delight to him. He himself wrote: "I know the pleasure of training a handsome horse. I enjoy it as much as anyone." A good observer wrote of him: "He loved horses, and had good ones, and rode carefully and safely, but I never liked his seat."

On exceptional occasions some touch of boyish memory breaks through habitual reserve. "'Twas seldom that he allowed his mind to wander to the days of his childhood and talk of his father and his early associates, but when he did he was far more charming than he thought," says Longstreet, with unusually delicate discrimination. Thus Lee writes, after the war, to a lady who had sent him photographs of Stratford, the grand old Virginia manor house where he was born: "Your picture vividly recalls scenes of my earliest recollections and happiest days. Though unseen for years, every feature of the house is familiar to me." And Miss Mason tells us that shortly before his death he visited Alexandria and "one of the old neighbors found him gazing wistfully over the palings of the garden in which he used to play." "I am looking," said he, "to see if the old snow-ball trees are still here. I should have been sorry to miss them." We know hardly more of Lee's education than of his childish adventures and amusements. When he was thirteen years old Jefferson wrote of Virginia generally: "What is her education now? Where is it? The little we have we import, like beggars, from other states; or import their beggars to bestow on us their miserable crumbs." But Jefferson was especially deploring the

lack of educational institutions. His democratic instincts could not put up with the traditions of a country where, down to the time of the Revolution, "newspapers and literature at large were a prescribed commodity," and whose governor, Sir William Berkeley, said: "I thank God there are no free schools nor printing and I hope we shall not have them these hundred years." Young men in Lee's station doubtless received more or less solid instruction of the classical order. In 1811 the Lees removed to Alexandria with a special view to educating the children. Robert's first teacher was a Mr. Leary, who lived until after the war and to whom his pupil wrote, in 1866, with kindly remembrance: "I beg to express the gratitude I have felt all my life for the affectionate fidelity which characterized your teaching and conduct towards me." Later, in preparation for West Point, Lee, still in Alexandria, attended the school of Mr. Benjamin Hallowell, where his time was chiefly devoted to mathematics. Hallowell writes that "he was a most exemplary student in every respect," with other laudatory reminiscences which had probably lost nothing by the lapse of time and the growing celebrity of the subject of them.

In 1825, when he was eighteen years old, Lee entered West Point. There seems to be general, if rather indefinite, testimony to his excellent conduct and standing in the Academy. He was a good scholar and graduated high in his class, but I do not find many anecdotes from contemporaries that will help us to humanize his life there. His unquestioned temperance and self-control in moral matters appear doubly creditable, when we read the statements made by Colonel Thayer, Superintendent of West Point at that time, to President Adams as to the drunkenness and dissipation generally prevalent among the young men.

Lee graduated duly in 1829, immediately received an appointment in the engineer corps, and was stationed for some years at Old Point Comfort. During this time he was married at Arlington, in June, 1831, to Miss Custis, Mrs. Washington's great-granddaughter, and through her he later came into control of an extensive property, with farms, and mansions, and a multitude of slaves. Although we get little account of it, his early married life must have brought him largely into contact with all the

opulence and gaiety and grace of that old Virginia aristocracy whose faults and virtues Mr. Page has painted so winningly that the faults seem almost as attractive as the virtues. Brave, handsome, courtly men, pure, dainty, loving, high-minded women, danced and laughed away the time, as they did in the golden world. "For all its faults, it was, I believe, the purest, sweetest life ever lived," says Mr. Page. Then the Northerner turns to the cold, judicial pages of Olmsted and reads of these same chivalrous gentlemen that though "honorable, hospitable, and at the bottom of their hearts kind and charitable, they yet nursed a high, overweening sense of their importance and dignity." He reads other things in Olmsted, of a much darker and grimmer order, and cannot avoid the momentary reflection that the most graceful and charming society in the world danced and laughed in France also before the Revolution. Yet perhaps, after all, there are some ugly things that light hearts are dancing over to-day.

By temperament Lee had none of the vices of that vanishing world and perhaps not all its good qualities. I doubt if it ever impressed him very deeply, and his wandering military life soon withdrew him altogether from its influence. One reminiscence of this period — though only a reminiscence and no doubt colored by the event, as such usually are — has marked interest in its anticipation of what was to come. It is given by a relative. "I have often said since he entered on his brilliant career that, although we all admired him for his remarkable beauty and attractive manners, I did not see anything in him that prepared me for his so far outstripping all his compeers. The first time this idea presented itself to me was during one of my visits to Arlington after my marriage. We were all seated around the table at night, Robert reading. I looked up and my eye fell upon his face in perfect repose, and the thought at once passed through my mind: 'You certainly look more like a great man than anyone I have ever seen.' " If all those who look like great men to their female relatives had attained Lee's greatness, what a great world it would be. Yet this glimpse has a crisp definiteness which makes one unwilling to pass it over.

During the years preceding the Mexican War Lee followed his profession of military engineer in different parts of the country. Now he was in Washington, incidentally messing with Joe Johnston and others afterwards more or less notable. Now he was in Ohio adjusting the boundary between that state and Michigan; or in New York harbor, supervising the defences.

Perhaps the most important of his engineering labors were those at St. Louis, connected with governing and controlling the course of the Mississippi River. The interesting thing here is that at first he met with a good deal of opposition and abuse. He bore this with entire indifference, quietly going on with his work until his final success won the approval and admiration of those who had been most ready to find fault. It was the same indomitable perseverance without regard to criticism which he showed again and again during the war and which perhaps is most concretely illustrated in the humorous anecdote told of him in Mexico. He had been ordered to take some sailors and construct a battery to be manned by them afterwards. The sailors did not like to dig dirt, and swore. Even their captain remonstrated. His men were fighters, not moles. Lee simply showed his orders and persisted. When the firing began, the eager marines found their earthworks exceedingly comfortable. Their commander even apologized to Lee. "Captain, I suppose, after all, your works helped the boys a good deal. But the fact is, I never did like this land fighting — it ain't clean."

Lee's services during the Mexican War have perhaps been exaggerated by his admirers; but the direct evidence shows that they were signal and valuable. He began as captain, serving with General Wool at the battle of Buena Vista. He then joined General Scott and took part in the siege of Vera Cruz. He was brevetted major at Cerro Gordo; lieutenant-colonel at Contreras, and colonel at Chapultepec. At the latter place he was slightly wounded. And from the beginning to the end of the war he displayed energy, daring, and resource.

Various anecdotes are told of his personal achievements and adventures, of his scouting expedition with a Mexican guide before Buena Vista, when Lee's persistent reconnoissances of the

enemy's position turned a vast collection of white tents into a Quixotic flock of sheep, of his nocturnal and storm-beaten exploration of a craggy lava tract, called the Pedregal, where no other man durst venture and whence no one believed that he could return alive.

As to this last incident General Scott declared, in formal legal testimony: "I had despatched several staff officers who had, within the space of two hours, returned and reported to me that each had found it impracticable to penetrate far into the Pedregal during the dark. . . . Captain Lee, having passed over the difficult ground by daylight, found it just possible to return to San Augustin in the dark, the greatest feat of physical and moral courage performed by any individual, in my knowledge, pending the campaign." And General P. F. Smith testifies to the same effect: "I wish partially to record my admiration of the conduct of Captain Lee, of the engineers. His reconnoissances, though pushed far beyond the bounds of prudence, were conducted with so much skill that their fruits were of the utmost value — the soundness of his judgment and personal daring being equally conspicuous."

Scott also bore general and repeated witness to the value of Lee's labors and the excellence of his character. We have the commander's written praise of "the gallant and indefatigable Captain Lee," who was "as distinguished for felicitous execution as for science and daring." We have the more emphatic, if less reliable, reported sayings, that Scott's own success in Mexico was largely due to the skill, valor, and undaunted energy of Robert E. Lee, that "Lee is the greatest military genius in America," and that "if I were on my death bed to-morrow, and the President of the United States should tell me that a great battle was to be fought for the liberty or slavery of the country, and asked my judgment as to the ability of a commander, I would say, with my dying breath, let it be Robert E. Lee." I find in *La Guerre de la Sécession en Amérique*, by E. Grasset (Vol. II, p. 59) a saying attributed to Scott, which I have not been able to trace to an American source, but which, if not a prophecy manufactured after the event, has a good deal of interest: "Défiez-vous de Lee quand il avance et de Johnston

lorsqu'il recule, car le diable lui-même se ferait battre, s'il les attaquait dans ces conditions."

Nor was Scott's praise of Lee wholly a matter of personal partiality, for the comment of other generals is equally laudatory. Lee's "distinguished merit and gallantry deserve the highest praise," says Pillow. Lee "in whose skill and judgment I had the utmost confidence," says Shields. "Equally daring and not less meritorious were the services of Captain Lee," says Pillow again.

I have dwelt thus minutely on these words of contemporaries, because they come from men who thought of Lee merely as a promising captain among other captains and did not look back at his dim past through the purple halo of Chancellorsville and the Wilderness.

With the Mexican War we enter more freely upon Lee's letters to his wife and children, which from that time form the best commentary on his life and character. He shows a keen appreciation of the beauty and richness of Mexican landscape: "Jalapa is the most beautiful country I have seen in Mexico, and will compare with any I have seen elsewhere. [Lee had travelled widely in his own country, but he never visited Europe.] I wish it was in the United States, and that I was located, with you and the children around me, in one of its rich, bright valleys. I can conceive nothing more beautiful in the way of landscape or mountain scenery. We ascended upwards of four thousand feet that morning, and whenever we looked back the rich valley was glittering in the morning sun and the light morning clouds flitted around us. On reaching the top, the valley appeared at intervals between the clouds which were below us, and high over all towered Orizaba, with its silver cap of snow."

He visits a sacred shrine and blends tropical color with the formal splendors of Catholic devotion: "The 'Trees of the Noche Triste,' so called from their blooming about the period of that event, are now in full bloom. The flower is a round ellipsoid, and of the most magnificent scarlet color I ever saw. I have two of them in my cup before me now. I wish I could send them to you. The holy image was standing on a large

silver maguey plant, with a rich crown on her head and an immense silver petticoat on. There were no votaries at her shrine, which was truly magnificent, but near the entrance of the church were the offerings of those whom she had relieved. They consist of representations in wax of the parts of the human body that she had cured of the diseases with which they had been affected. And I may say there were all parts. I saw many heads severed from the trunks. Whether they represented those whom she had restored I could not learn. It would be a difficult feat."

The references to politics in these letters are interesting because they show more vehemence and ardor of expression than, I think, Lee would have permitted himself in later years. Thus, he writes of the treatment of Trist by the administration: "I presume it is perfectly fair, having made use of his labors, and taken from him all that he had earned, that he should be kicked off as General Scott has been, whose skill and science, having crushed the enemy and conquered a peace, can now be dismissed, and turned out as an old horse to die." And, again in connection with Scott: "The great cause of our success was in our leader. It was his stout heart that cast us on the shore of Vera Cruz; his bold self-reliance that forced us through the pass at Cerro Gordo; his indomitable courage that, amidst all the doubts and difficulties that surrounded us at Puebla, pressed us forward to this capital, and finally brought us within its gates, while others, who croaked all the way from Brazos, and advised delay at Puebla, finding themselves at last, contrary to their expectations, comfortably quartered within the city, find fault with the way they came there."

Also as to the general question of the war, the captain of forty speaks out with greater frankness than we find in the letters of the Confederate commander of fifty-five. "It is rather late in the day to discuss the origin of the war; that ought to have been understood before we engaged in it. It may have been produced by the act of either party or the force of circumstances. Let the pedants in diplomacy determine. It is certain that we are the victors in a regular war, continued, if not brought on, by their obstinacy and ignorance, and they are

whipped in a manner of which women might be ashamed. We have the right, by the laws of war, of dictating the terms of peace and requiring indemnity for our losses and expenses. Rather than forego that right, except through a spirit of magnanimity to a crushed foe, I would fight them ten years, but I would be generous in exercising it."

After the Mexican War Lee resumed the routine life of his profession, sojourning in one part of the country or another as duty called. He was invited by the Cuban Junta to become their military leader; but he declined because he felt such a position to be hardly compatible with his training as an officer of the United States army. He was busied for some time with the construction of a fort in Baltimore. In 1852 he was made superintendent of the West Point Academy. His diffidence about accepting this position is extremely characteristic: "I learn with much regret the determination of the Secretary of War to assign me to that duty, and I fear I cannot realize his expectations in the management of an institution requiring more skill and more experience than I command."

I find little direct evidence as to Lee's life at West Point, but his biographer declares that it was in every way successful. "The discipline of the Academy was made more efficient, the course of study was extended to five years, and a spacious riding hall was constructed." Colonel Chesney makes similar statements from personal observation: "The writer visited West Point during the time of General Lee's charge and saw the institution very thoroughly, passing some days there. He is able, therefore, to testify to its completeness, and the efficiency of the courses of study and discipline — never more remarkable, he believes, than at that period." Captain Lee testifies to his father's kindness of manner and ready tact in making the raw students feel at ease and tells one anecdote which is perfectly characteristic. Lee was riding one day with his son, when they caught sight of three cadets who were evidently far out of bounds and who at once retired still further. After a few moments' silence, Lee said: "Did you know those young men? But no, if you did, don't say so. I wish boys would do what is right, it would be so much easier for all parties."

In 1855 Lee was appointed to a lieutenant-colonelcy in one of the newly created cavalry regiments and ceased his connection with West Point. From this time until the breaking out of the war his service was mainly in the southwestern states, while his family remained at Arlington.

Many of the letters written during these years have been printed. As letters they are not especially brilliant or remarkable. But they are interesting for the study of Lee, as showing his gentleness, his constant care and thought for others, and his shrewd and just observation of everything that was going on about him. Playful descriptions of scenes and people alternate with deeper feeling such as his expression of grief for a child over whose body he had been asked to read the funeral service. "I hope I shall not be called on again, for though I believe that it is far better for the child to be called by its Heavenly Creator into His presence in its purity and innocence, unpolluted by sin and uncontaminated by the vices of the world, still it so wrings a parent's heart with anguish that it is painful to see. Yet I know it was done in mercy to both — mercy to the child, mercy to the parents."

To his own children he writes with gaiety and grace. "Robert . . . has been prospecting about the neighborhood for cherry trees, and their bloom on the sides of the mountain delights his vision every moment. He revels at dinner in fried chicken and mush. An elegant school in his opinion." And again he passes to sober advice, useful, if not original: "As you have commenced, I hope you will continue never to exceed your means. It will save you much anxiety and mortification, and enable you to maintain your independence of character and feeling. It is easier to make our wishes conform to our means than our means conform to our wishes. In fact, we want but little. Our happiness depends upon our independence, the success of our operations, prosperity of our plans, health, contentment, and the esteem of our friends."

Then, suddenly, into a life thus organized for comparative peace and quiet, burst the thunderbolt of war. It had not of course been unexpected, to Lee any more than to anyone else. To him, more than perhaps to almost anyone else, because of

his position and temperament, it came full of burden and anguish, unilluminated by hope. He trusts that President Buchanan "will be able to extinguish fanaticism North and South, cultivate love for the country and Union, and restore harmony between the different sections." As the prospect thickens, he finds confidence more difficult: "My little personal troubles sink into insignificance when I contemplate the condition of the country, and I feel as if I could easily lay down my life for its safety. But I also feel that it would bring but little good."

In October, 1859, Lee was on furlough at Arlington and it has always struck me as exceedingly dramatic, all things considered, that he should have been the officer ordered to arrest John Brown. It was not in Lee's nature to play up to a dramatic situation, however, and his conduct of the affair was as quiet, as businesslike, as free from sensational methods as such a thing could be. He made his preparations, called on Brown and his followers to surrender, gave the order to attack, attacked, and in a few moments all was over. His account in his memorandum-book is perfectly dry and quiet: "Tuesday about sunrise, with twelve marines under the command of Lieutenant Green, broke in the door of the engine-house, secured the robbers, and released all of the [Southern] prisoners unhurt." His testimony as to the whole affair before the Congressional Committee is in the same tone: "The result proves that the plan was the attempt of a fanatic or madman which could only end in failure; and its temporary success was owing to the panic and confusion he succeeded in creating by magnifying his numbers." Yet a mind so shrewd as Lee's must have had some suspicion that there were more fanatics and madmen in the North who might create panic and confusion beside which Brown's would sink into utter insignificance.

As we pause here for a moment, before entering on the sudden and astonishing glory of Lee's career, it will be well to form some conception of his physical qualities and personal appearance. The great doers of the world have not always been handsome or even imposing. Cæsar, when he triumphed, may have had dignity from habit of command, but there can have been little beauty in his lean caducity. Napoleon, in later years,

was fat and vulgar, for all the dominating power of his glance. It pleases us to think that Grant and Lincoln could look as they did and be what they were. Yet there is undeniably something appropriate, something satisfying, in the kingly stature and lineaments of Pericles and Washington. It cannot harm a royal soul to dwell within a royal body. And not Pericles nor Washington would seem in this to have been more royal than was Lee.

From the study of photographs I can get a more charming impression of his later years than of his earlier. The face and figure of the captain are eminently noble, high-bred, dignified; but with the dignity there is just a suggestion of haughtiness, of remoteness. Or do I see in the picture only what I imagine of the man? But in the bearded photographs of later years all trace of such remoteness has vanished. The dignity is more marked than ever, but all sweet. The ample, lordly carriage, the broad brow, the deep, significant, intelligent eyes convey nothing but the largest tenderness, the profoundest human sympathy, the most perfect love. And again, perhaps I see only what I imagine.

The record of actual observers is of more interest than any comment founded on portraits, since Captain Lee tells us that "My father could never bear to have his picture taken and there are no likenesses of him that really give his sweet expression." To begin with, Lee's was a thoroughly manly beauty and founded all his life on a magnificent physique. "From infancy to three score," says an opponent who loved and admired him, "he knew no physical malady [this is not strictly correct], and the admirable symmetry of his person and the manly beauty of his countenance were the aids to his virtues which secured to him tolerance, affection, and respect from all with whom he mingled. Even towards the close of the war, when he was nearly sixty, it was his habit, when the pressure was great, "to retire about ten or eleven at night, to rise at three A.M., breakfast by candlelight and return to the front, spending the entire day on the lines."

In his earlier life he is pictured by General Hunt as being "as fine-looking a man as one would wish to see, of perfect figure and strikingly handsome," and by General Meigs as "a man then

in the vigor of youthful strength, with a noble and commanding presence, and an admirable, graceful, and athletic figure." "He had," says Colonel Preston, "a finished form, delicate hands; was graceful in person." When he became superintendent at West Point he is described more minutely as "five feet eleven inches high, weighing 175 pounds, hair originally jet black and inclined to curl at the ends; eyes hazel brown, face cleanly shaved except a moustache; a countenance which beamed with gentleness and benevolence."

At the time of the war, when more years had passed over him, Wise portrays him as follows: "His form had fulness without any appearance of superfluous flesh, and was as erect as that of a cadet, without the slightest apparent constraint. His features are too well-known to need description, but no representation of General Lee which I have ever seen properly conveys the light and softness of his eye, the tenderness and intelligence of his mouth, or the indescribable refinement of his face. One picture gives him a meatiness about the nose; another, hard or coarse lines about the mouth; another, heaviness about the chin. None of them give the effect of his hair and beard. I have seen all the great men of our times except Mr. Lincoln and I have no hesitation in saying that Robert E. Lee was incomparably the greatest looking of them all." And Alexander H. Stephens, when he saw Lee for the first time and pressed upon him the question as to Virginia's joining the Confederacy, beheld a personage well worthy to make a great decision in a great cause. "As he stood there, fresh and ruddy as a David from the sheepfold, in the prime of his manly beauty and the embodiment of a line of heroic and patriotic fathers and worthy mothers, it was thus I first saw Robert E. Lee. . . . I had before me the most manly and entire gentleman I ever saw."

How many men have we all met who seemed built to play heroic parts, yet did not and could not play them. It is well, perhaps, that such a part should occasionally be played by a man whom nature has moulded for it.

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